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ABSTRACT

Speech communication teachers can assist students in gaining more facility with language by helping them become active learners or problem solvers through: (1) experiencing an event; (2) reflecting on this experience which leads to (3) the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations about what has been learned; and finally (4) incorporating and using those concepts by actively experimenting with them. The best way to help students become more aware of their own language and to learn to assess its effectiveness is to have students hear and see their own discourse. Instructors might audio tape samples of student speeches. The students are then given evaluation forms which they must complete while listening to the tape of their own speech. In addition to listening, students are required to make a transcript of all of their utterances used in an oral assignment. Without exception, when the students made and analyzed a transcript, they became aware of their problems. Other assignments use group work and mini-speeches to develop descriptive powers. The teacher's job is to help students learn to use language more effectively, to involve the students actively in the learning process. Instead of doing all the reflection and conceptualization for the students, the teacher must help them to learn to self-assess and extract learning principles from this assessment. (Two appendixes containing a sample self-assessment form and sample designs for an exercise are attached.) (RAE)

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FUNDAMENTALS OF TEACHING ORAL LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT

Guidelines and Exercises for Public Communication Teachers

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FUNDAMENTALS OF TEACHING ORAL LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT
Guidelines and Exercises for Public Communication Teachers

Much has been written about the state of language usage in our society. Edwin Newman in Strictly Speaking argues that we live in a world of cliches and slogans and that words have lost their meanings for all too many Americans (1974, p.5). Harry Overstreet in The Mature Mind writes that poor language skills are so common that they are "taken for granted as natural." The articulate person is an exception to the rule and "the person who is immature--halting, clumsy, obscure, rambling, dull, platitudinous, insensitive--is the rule" (1959, pp. 54-55). Whether we agree or not with Overstreet about the extent of the problem, as communicational professionals, we have all experienced how power and force are stripped from ideas by weak and sloppy language.

Note the language problems in the following excerpts taken from prepared speeches given in a beginning public communication course.

> ...First of all if we get away from "the cheese shots" and actual posed pictures because these are not the real people. You want to have the real thing - not a phony - and you can't get this by using or by taking the actual posed pictures, that is the "cheese shots." As one TV commercial said, "Go for the real thing."

> ...This woman who would make millions selling cosmetics had a nephew and so every so often he would come over and visit and he kind of got inspired to have a love for chemistry and I guess she inspired him in this and so he would start mixing other ingredients up and she was so outgoing that her personality she would work better with customer relations and public relations and things like that and so he would stay home and mix ingredients and the other chemicals and she would go out and work with the customers...

The two examples given below were extracted from student impromptu speeches.

> ...We need to have more programs for older people so they can have some, you know, recreational things going for them. They really don't have a lot to do, you know. The community centers could have uh the older people uh could go play bingo there or have something like a social. They could do something, you know, there are lots of things they could do.

> ...You know we live in America, and America is supposed to be the greatest country in the whole entire world, and I am pretty sure that other and also powerful countries and their people know the geography or the geographical areas of the United States, but I

> think it is a very sad event that a lot of American students, and adults as well, do not know the parts of the United States as far as the cities, states, counties, and what not. I think that is very very sad when American students and adults as well can't'- dont't even know our own geography. This is a pretty important issue...

These excerpts are not from speeches given by provisionally-admitted students. All four students have moderately high grades and SAT scores which would permit their admission to most colleges in the country. While not all students have the same language problems as these four, I believe these examples illustrate common language difficulties encountered by a significant number of college students.

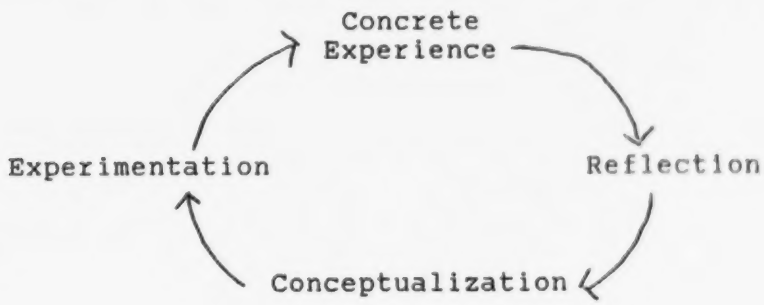
Some skeptics may be thinking that the underlying problem with these excerpts is not one of language but one of concept clarity. They would argue that if the speakers had a clearer idea of what they wished to say, the language would improve on its own. This is certainly the case in some situations, and clear conception is unarguably necessary for clear language and effective communication. But clear conception does not guarantee clear or effective language. I believe it is erroneous and counterproductive--albeit an easy solution--to say to these four students and others like them that the main problem with the discourse is that they did not have a clear idea of what they wanted to say. I do not think we should assume that the student with weak language skills has less grasp of the content or has less substantive information to contribute. I am confident all four of the students knew their subject matter well, but with the stress and demands of the situation, they failed to reveal that knowledge because of weak language skills.

These excerpts also illustrate a problem more frequently occurring in oral language than in written. If these students had been allowed to speak from a manuscript, their language in all probability would have been more coherent, specific, and less cluttered. If they had been asked to write a term paper on the chosen topics, their language would probably have been more vivid, emphatic, and economic. But these students did not have the opportunity to revise and edit in the same way they would have a term paper. Herein lies one of the fundamental differences in teaching oral versus written composition. This difference makes "teaching" oral language effectiveness more difficult. Students are, of course, supposed to revise their language as they practice their speeches, but the oral revision and editing process is more demanding. This process, however, is just as vital in oral communication as it is in written. Any English instructor will tell you that every writer needs to revise and edit but some need extra help in learning the process. The same is true in oral communication. In terms of language in particular, all students need to spend some time polishing and refining their language, but some students need extra help with finding, forming, and controlling the language they will use to transfer meaning.

How then do we assist students in gaining more facility

with language? The purpose of this paper is to provide some guidelines and exercises for helping students enrolled in a public speaking course to improve their language usage. Although the terms used to define effective language vary from one textbook to another, there seems to be general agreement that a students' goal should be to use language which is accurate, clear, specific, vivid, appropriate, and relatively free of clutter.

Acquiring new language skills and changing old habits are part of active learning. Students need to follow the steps in learning in this situation just as they do when learning to speak a foreign language, to write a term paper, or to solve managerial problems. I find Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre's "learning cycle" (1984, pp.31-32) which is based on experiential learning theory particularly helpful in analyzing the kinds of activities needed to help students move through the learning cycle.



So active learners or problem solvers (1) experience an event, and (2) then they need to reflect on this experience which (3) leads to the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations about what has been learned, and (4) finally the learners need to incorporate and use those concepts by actively experimenting with them. (See Johnson, 1983, for an application of this learning cycle to written composition.)

Step one is easy. As public speaking instructors, we merely need to provide speaking experiences for the students. Step two and three are more difficult: here we must encourage the student's active involvement in the language assessment process. Since I find many students are particularly unaware of aspects of their own language and have little idea of how they sound to others, this step is crucial. If an instructor does all the evaluation and requires no reflection on the students' part, a break may occur in the learning cycle. Although I do believe we must evaluate the students' language, we must also help students to hear and recognize their own strengths and weaknesses before any permanent change can occur. In step four, we must provide the situations which are designed to help a student apply various language principles and to experiment with language change. Students do not change language by reading about theories or by analyzing models. Theories and models will help them discover what language can do, but students must speak in a variety of situations to learn what they can do with their own language. The activities discussed in this paper are based on the assumption that the instructor's goal is to provide the opportunities which will assist students in moving through the learning cycle.

REFLECTION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

I believe the best way to help students become more aware of their own language and to learn to assess its effectiveness is to have students hear and see their own discourse. I recommend that instructors audio tape at least two samples of student speeches. I audio tape all student speeches, and find this can easily and unobtrusively be done. Although students may listen to their speeches on campus in a media services lab, students usually bring their own tape cassette so that they can take the cassette home and listen to it. Students are always given evaluation forms which they must complete and return to me. Although language evaluation is only one part of their analysis, it is a significant part.

In addition to the listening, I recommend an exercise which requires the students to see as well as hear their language. In order to analyze their language, students are required to make a transcript of all of their utterances used in an oral assignment. I have found this assignment to be most effective in facilitating the development of self awareness and assessment skills. I have had numerous students that even after listening to an audio tape of their discourse did not recognize some problems with clutter, coherence, or specifity. But, without exception, when the students made and analyzed a transcript, they became aware of the problem. When I asked students to evaluate the assignment, I received comments such as the following.

> "It was a rude awakening."
> "I never realized how much unnecessary language I used."
> "I didn't believe you (the instructor) when you said I tied most sentences together with 'and' until I made the transcript."
> "I don't know why I didn't hear that my explanation was vague and disjointed on the tape. But I sure saw it on the paper."
> "Everyone should do it (the transcript) once. It makes you aware of those little distracting words that you would not ordinarily notice."

At the end of each term, I ask students to not only evaluate various course activities but also to indicate whether they believe I should continue to use an assignment or not. Eighty per cent of the students strongly recommended that I continue to require the transcript analysis.The twenty per cent that did not favor the continuation thought the exercise was too time-consuming and not helpful. However, some of these students admitted that they had given, in spite of my instructions, a memorized speech or had closely followed a manuscript. Obviously making a transcript is not helpful under these conditions.

Exactly what I require depends on student needs. I usually have all students make and analyze two transcripts--one for a short ungraded speech and one for a major graded speech. (Depending on the speech length, students are not always required to transcribe the entire speech.) Occasionally I have asked just one student to make a transcript --for example of a speech where the student seemed unaware of the extent of the rambling nature of his comments. I have given in Appendix A one sample assignment requiring a transcript. This assignment is adapted to

the language terms and categories used in the adopted public speaking textbook, but it can easily be adapted using other categories.

EXPERIMENTATION

The fourth step in the learning cycle requires that a student have experiences which permit experimenting with language. However, more is required than just opportunities to speak. As we all know, to speak often does not necessarily mean one is learning to speak well. So these speaking experiences must be focused in order to help a student reflect and extract the learning principles involved, and these opportunites must also be structured so that a student will be motivated to experiment with language.

In order to help motivate students to experiment using different language styles, I recommend using several speaking activites where students will get credit for participating but will not receive a grade. If students are graded on every assignment, they may be more cautious especially if they are satisfied with past grades. Also if all assignments are graded, I believe the focus is on the exhibition of what one has learned and not on the act of learning itself. However, since participating for the sake of learning alone is sometimes not enough to motivate some students, I use a system of checks (✓-, ✓, ✓+) to give students credit for participating in all the learning exercises I use throughout the semester. ("✓-" are rarely given, and then only if a student is not meeting any of the requirements of the exercise.) Students are required to complete 75 per cent of all the learning exercises used in order to pass the class.

Next, I encourage the use of group work in public speaking classes because this provides the students with more speaking opportunities. With classes of 25, it is difficult, if not impossible, to give each student the experiences needed. Also since speaking before an entire class is more threatening than speaking to a small group, this group work encourages more experimentation. For this reason, I frequently adapt written exercises suggested in the textbook to oral exercises students can do in groups. For example, several authors suggest that students write three different introductions for a speech. I have students do this, and then they try out all three in small groups.

Although group work is valuable, students also need opportunities--in addition to the major graded speeches-- to speak before the class. In the major graded speech, the emphasis is usually on the exhibition of what one has learned. In the speech exercise, the emphasis is on the act of learning itself. I encourage the use of ungraded two to three minute speeches where students are urged to work on some area of language development. This can, of course, be coupled with other areas needing work. Students need not give a completed speech but only part of one. For example, I frequently have speakers select a section of their last graded speech for some significant revision and present this to the class in approximately two minutes.

Two examples of speaking assignments which I believe encourage experimentation and which are sufficiently focused to promote reflection and conceptualization are given below.

1. This is a modified version of an exercise widely used to illustrate the importance of feedback. I prefer using this as a language exercise.

Students are put into groups of 5 or 6. Then each student gets a geometric design which they show to no one else. One person at a time tells the others in the group how to draw the design. The listeners draw as the person is talking being careful not to let any one see their drawings. The speaker and listeners may not ask questions nor use any gestures. The speakers's task is to get the listeners to reproduce the drawing by using clear, specific and well adapted language. After each speaker finishes, the listeners then show the speaker their drawings which vividly represent the message they received. Since it is rare for a speaker to see in black and white the meanings their words have, I find the exercise particularly valuable.

I try to allow enough time so that each student can speak at least twice. But some groups move faster than others, so I have enough designs to allow each student to speak three times. Each group get the same packet of designs, so if you have six in a group you will need eighteen designs. In Appendix B I have given some examples of the type of designs that work well.

2. Since good description requires accurate, specific, and vivid language, descriptive mini-speeches are valuable learning exercises. I use the following exercise in advanced public speaking, but it can be used in other classes as well.

Prior to the day of the mini-speeches, I explore with the class the nature of effective description, and we examine a picture of a person (for example one of a child lost in a crowded department store). Initially the descriptions are usually weak and consist of abstract adjectives. For example, the child is merely described as sad and afraid. To help the class think of other ways to get an audience to experience the essence of the picture, I ask them to consider:

> What about the size, shape, composition and the relationship among the parts communicates significant information to you? Why?
>
> What emotion do you experience when you examine the picture? Why? How can you communicate this emotion to the audience?
>
> Does the picture immediately make you think of something else? What? Why?
>
> What is there in the picture that one might not immediately notice?

This discussion usually produces a variety of effective descriptions.

On the day of the exercise, students are put in groups of three or four (four is ideal), and each group member is then sequentially assigned a number from one to four. Each student is

given a picture of a person they must describe to the class (e.g. an athlete receiving an olympic medal and wiping away a tear, a migrant worker picking tomatoes, a millionaire sailing on his yacht, a frustrated student experiencing "writer's block"). All students assigned #1 in each group are given the same picture. All students assigned #2 are given the same picture, and so forth. Students are asked to describe the picture to the group in any way they wish. They are given the questions discussed above to help them with their descriptions, but they are cautioned not to go through and answer each question. After giving the students a few minutes to plan their mini-speeches, all those assigned #1 are given one to two minutes to describe the picture. All listeners see the picture. After the description, group members are given one to two minutes to tell the speaker what language they found particularly expressive and what the speaker might change. All #1 speakers then rotate to another group and are asked to repeat the activity but to add to or change their description in some way. Group members again comment on the description. The same process is repeated with a third and final rotation of all #1 speakers.

Then the sequence begins with all #2 speakers, and proceeds in exactly the same manner until all # 4 speakers have had three rotation. This rotation permits each person to speak three times and each listener to compare the language of three descriptions of the same picture.

Each group must have a time keeper, and the instructor and time keepers must adhere to strict time limits. In the beginning I find time adherence is usually no problem since student description are usually not even one minute; but by the end of the exercise, descriptions and group comments tend to get longer, and time must be called. Although I have to watch the time closely and I prefer using the exercise in small classes, I can finish the exercise in one hour even in a large class. Although the format may seem quite cumbersome at first, once the class and instructor get into a pattern and adhere to the time limits the exercise proceeds smoothly.

I have used several modified versions of this assignment. A simple version without any rotations is to have students describe a picture which the group does not see, After the description, the speaker shows the picture to the group members who then comment on the accuracy and vividness of the speaker's description. I have also used the rotation sequence with other assignments such as the defining of abstract terms (e.g. justice, good teacher, ideal marriage); and, although the rotation sequence may seem complicated at first, it does provide a format that encourages experimentation and provides numerous opportunities to speak on the same topic to different audiences.

CONCLUSION

If you consider the ideas and exercises discussed in this paper valuable but you are puzzled as to how any instructor has the luxury of spending so much time on language usage, realize that many ideas discussed here can be combined with other course topics. Since a speaker's facility with language will determine to a great extent the effectiveness of an introduction, conclusion, supporting material, and audience adaptation, work on these areas can frequently be combined -- indeed I do not think they can be separated. For this reason, I introduce the topic of language usage early in the semester before I discuss the specifics of the speech. This way language is not seen as a separate component of a speech, but as an integral part of each step.

Since our job is not just to help students discover the power of effective language, but to help them learn to use language more effectively, we must involve the students actively in the learning process. Instead of doing all the reflection and conceptualization for the students, we must help them to learn to self-assess and extract learning principles from this assessment. We must also provide the opportunities active learners need to experiment with applying these principles. Students' ideas are frequently imprisoned by weak language since language controls and limits the access others have to their ideas. When we help them to gain more control over the language they use, we help them with all aspects of the communication process.

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APPENDIX A
SAMPLE SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM

AN EXERCISE IN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

Listen to the tape of your speech and then make a transcript of all you said. Write down all utterances even phrases such as "well uh," "you know," "I guess" and "and um." You are writing down what you actually said -- not what you wished you had said or meant to say. ATTACH THE TRANSCRIPT TO THIS FORM.

After making the transcript, analyze your language using the following guide. When you are asked to mark on the transcript, be sure I can easily identify each example. You may wish to use a highlighter pen and then add comments in the margin.

1. Using clear language.
Study the transcript and then ask yourself if you used language that immediately allowed the audience to understand you. Was the language precise and exact? Was it adapted well? Was it specific and concrete? Now complete the following analysis.

Select two specific examples where you effectively used clear language and mark them on the transcript.

Now select two examples from the transcript where language would have been improved if you had used clearer expressions and mark them on the transcript. Next revise each of these examples thinking of a more effective way to get your meaning across. Write your revisions in the space below. (See p. 210 in Lucas* for an example of an effective revision.)

(Sufficient space for student responses has been omitted in this sample form.)

2. Using vivid language.
Study the transcript and ask yourself if you used language that was interesting? Forceful? Emphatic? Did you paint any mental pictures? What special language devices did you use?

After examining the transcript, select two examples where you used vivid language and clearly mark them on the transcript.

Next select two sections of the speech which would be improved by the use of vivid language. Mark the sections on the transcript. Revise the two sections making them particularly vivid and give your final revisions in the space below.

3. Using language free from distractions and clutter
Ask yourself if your language contained any distracting clutter (e.g. "you know," "okay," "and um"), ungrammatical expressions, or any other inappropriate language which would distract listeners. Also check to see that there is no unnecessary wording and that language is direct and compelling. (For an example, see Lucas, p.211.)

Then select two examples where you used cluttered, unnecessary, or distracting language and clearly mark them on the transcript. Now revise and/or edit your language and give your revisions for both examples in the space below.

*The textbook used in the course is The Art of Public Speaking by Stephen Lucas (1986) which is published by Random House.

APPENDIX B
EXAMPLES OF GEOMETRIC DESIGNS TO USE WITH THE LANGUAGE EXERCISE DISCUSSED ON PAGE 5.

Designs such as the following are on separate index cards. Simple designs work best.